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Abstract
The retention of social workers in child protection and welfare is an ongoing concern in many countries. While our knowledge base on the turnover of child protection and welfare social workers is growing, much less in known about 'stayers' – those who undertake this work for over 10+ years. This article draws on data gathered over a decade in Ireland on these social workers. The article addresses three questions: 1) what can we learn from social workers with 10+ years' experience of child protection and welfare about their retention? 2) does job embeddedness theory help explain their choices to stay? 3) does the 'career preference typology' (Burns, 2011) help explain social workers' retention? The main findings are that if you can retain social workers beyond the 5-year point, their retention narrative intensifies, their embeddedness in the organisation and community strengthens and they have a stronger sense of professional confidence as they move out of the early professional stage. A surprising finding of this study was that nearly all of the social workers in this study had a staying narrative that changed little between their interviews a decade apart.

Keywords:
Child protection and welfare; retention; job satisfaction; job embeddedness; resilience longitudinal research.

Introduction

The knowledge base examining turnover of social workers in child protection and welfare has developed considerably over the last decade (see, for example, Burns, 2011; Webb and Carpenter, 2011; Madden *et al.*, 2014; Lizano and Mor Barak, 2015; Frost *et al.*, 2017; McFadden *et al.*, 2017). Key arguments and findings in this literature and research are that: child protection social work is emotionally and intellectually demanding work; it is work that is particularly subject to public, media and political scrutiny, especially when there are perceived errors; the emotional, mental and practical workload can be demanding; being repeatedly exposed to trauma can be stressful for workers; the work can be laden with conflict, none more so than in the adversarial nature of court work (Burns *et al.*, 2018); and administrative loads for child protection social workers are increasing, with less 'face-time' with children and parents. For these, and many other reasons, it is reported that social workers do not stay for long tenures in this area of social work.

The literature is replete with references to job strain, burnout and high turnover, and this study originally began by researching similar themes. However, this study uncovered a somewhat different story in Ireland: in the first data collection period, we found high retention rates in the five teams we examined and many study participants sought to challenge what they perceived as 'earn your stripes' (i.e. putting in hard work and effort and gaining the respect of peers as a result) and 'leave child protection quickly' narratives (Burns, 2011; Burns and Christie, 2013). In the original dataset, we were surprised to find that two-thirds of the social workers had expressed a preference to continue working in child protection and welfare in the short to medium-term. This study returned to the original sample of social workers a decade later to find out how many of them stayed in child protection and welfare, to examine what helped them to stay, and specifically, to analyse their narratives of staying. While a wide range of the data collection methods are identified by Riessman and Quinney (2005) as 'narrative' research, the method adopted in this research was to encourage social workers, in response to a few broad questions asked by the researcher, to take the lead in shaping their own professional narratives. This method encouraged social workers to actively construct, and reflect, on their ongoing professional identities.

In a previous paper, we have been critical of the manner in which the data on staff turnover is presented in some of the literature (Burns and Christie, 2013). There are fewer published papers that examine the experiences of 'stayers' (those who stay in child protection and welfare for longer tenures than the average) or studies that examine organisations or countries with high levels of staff retention. There are even fewer studies that examine retention longitudinally: where this data is available, most of the available longitudinal studies are quantitative and focus on child protection and welfare in the United States (see, for example, Scannapieco and Connell-Carrick, 2007; Wilke *et al.*, 2017).

This paper expands and builds upon the findings of a paper previously published in this journal (Burns, 2011), by contributing to the literature in two key ways. Firstly, we believe it is the first qualitative longitudinal study to examine retention over a 10-year period. Secondly, it contributes to our understanding of retention through

analysing the experiences of a unique cohort of social workers who have worked in child protection for 10+ years. The guiding questions for this study were: 1) What can we learn about retention from social workers with 10+ years' experience of child protection? 2) Does job embeddedness theory help explain their retention? 3) Did the 'career preference typology' help explain social workers' retention?

Literature review

Irish data on turnover in child protection and welfare

The Child and Family Agency (Tusla) was established in January 2014 and provides child protection and welfare social work services in Ireland. The agency does not publish turnover data in its annual reports or Section 8 'adequacy reports'. In the absence of official data, the media have been significant in shaping the Irish story of staff retention in child protection and welfare. A media headline in 2015 announced that social workers in child protection and welfare in Ireland were 'resigning at [a] rate of one a week' with a sub-heading proclaiming that 'a large number of social workers are leaving the profession' (RTÉ, 2015). This promoted a public response from the Child and Family Agency arguing that such a rate of departures by social workers actually suggested a very low turnover rate (under 10%). There are continual reports in the media about the Child and Family Agency's difficulty in retaining social workers and there are now a significant number of staff vacancies in Tusla (McMahon, 2018). A more recent example is a November 2017 headline in a national newspaper reporting on data submitted by the Child and Family Agency to the Dáil's (Parliament) Public Accounts Committee (PAC) which read: '475 social workers have quit Tusla since 2014' (Baker, 2017).

While Baker's (2017) headline suggests that there is a retention issue for child protection and welfare social workers, the body of the article reported turnover rates in Ireland that appear to be low by international standards. Table 1 presents the turnover rates for social workers in the Agency from the Public Accounts Committee submission by Tusla on which the Baker article was based (Child and Family Agency, 2017b, p. 1) and the Tusla submission to the Oireachtas Joint Committee for Children and Youth Affairs (Smyth, 2019):

Table 1: Turnover rates for social workers in the Child and Family Agency, 2014-2018

Year	**Turnover %**
2014	6.58%
2015	9.41%
2016	8.4%
2018	7.79%

These figures are significantly less than the turnover rate of 15% (September 2017) for the children and family social work workforce in England (Department for Education, 2018). A closer look at the data from Ireland shows that these turnover rates are for *all* social workers in the Child and Family Agency, rather than specifically for those in child protection and welfare only (for example, some social workers employed by Tusla work in foster care, rather than directly in child protection social work) and therefore the figure is not directly comparable with the data from England. In December 2018, there were 1,458 social work staff by whole time equivalent (WTE) working in Tusla (Smyth, 2019), but this figure is not broken down by area of work, which constrains further analysis of the turnover data in Table 1. Consultations by the authors with team managers indicated that these figures do not reflect the situation in some child protection and welfare teams where there are much higher turnover rates and some teams also now have significant staff vacancies. Table 2 presents data from the unpublished Tusla submission to the Public Accounts Committee on reasons why 495 social workers left Tusla from its inception in 2014 up to September 2017.

Table 2: Social Work Leavers 1/1/2014 – 30/9/2017

Reasons	2014	2015	2016	2017	Grand Total	%
Cost Neutral Early Retirement	8	6	2	1	17	3.4%
Death	-	1	3	-	4	0.8%
End of Contract	1	3	3	1	8	1.6%
Family Reasons	7	7	4	9	27	5.5%
Further Training	-	-	1	1	2	0.4%
Going Abroad	12	7	14	8	41	8.3%
No Job Satisfaction	3	1	6	1	11	2.2%
No Promotional Opportunities	-	2	5	2	9	1.8%
Other/ No Specified Reason	39	46	65	60	212	42.8%
Other Health Board / Agency	7	17	9	4	37	7.5%
Permanent Infirmity	4	5	2	2	13	2.6%
Personal	8	13	13	15	49	9.9%
Reached Maximum Retirement	2	9	9	10	30	6.1%
Reached Minimum Retirement	6	10	10	5	31	6.3%
Unsuitable Hours	-	3	-	1	4	0.8%
Grand Total	**97**	**130**	**146**	**120**	**495**	**100%**

The large number of social workers n=212 (43%) that did not state a specific reason for leaving or who were recorded as 'other', significantly limits the analytical potential of this data and it is unclear why so many are recorded under these categories. A low number of social workers were recorded as leaving for 'no job satisfaction' n=11 (2%) and no promotional opportunities n=9 (1.8%).

In two previous phases of our study (Burns, 2012; Burns and Christie, 2013), we undertook a thorough analysis of all social work staff changes on five child protection and welfare teams over two time periods. Our analysis enabled a granular look at employment changes on five child protection and welfare teams, separating true turnover from mobility and internal organisational staff movement between posts. We

calculated a turnover rate of 8% in 2006 and 11% in 2010 for child protection social workers on these five teams. We also noted that there was significant additional employment *mobility* due to staff changes such as maternity leaves and leaves of absences.

The Child and Family Agency - and previously the Health Service Executive – have experienced a long period between 2009 and 2015/2016 where the recruitment of social workers in child protection was relatively unproblematic due to labour market conditions in a period of austerity. The Child and Family Agency is now growing and it is experiencing recruitment issues again: other employers in all fields of social work are recruiting as the economy improves and the Child and Family Agency now argue that there are insufficient graduates to meet staff vacancies (Child and Family Agency, 2019; Smyth, 2019). Notwithstanding these observations, there has still been a long period of stability in child protection and welfare teams in Ireland over the last decade, with social workers often working in this area for many years. Whatever the actual turnover rate has been for social workers in child protection, Ireland over the last decade has had lower turnover rates and longer tenure periods for front-line social workers than other countries (see, for example, Williams and Glisson, 2013; Kim and Mor Barak, 2015). The likelihood that a large cohort of social workers from the original study could still be working in child protection and welfare social work close to 10 years later prompted us to return to see how many of the original sample were still working there. This would allow us to explore their experiences of this sector over a decade and their staying narratives.

The ability to retain workers develops all kinds of positive dividends: low recruitment costs, lower training and induction costs for newly-qualified staff, staff with longer tenures have greater job knowledge and should have more developed skill sets, contributing to a 'healthy' balance of novice, experienced and expert workers on teams. This is a particular goal for child protection and welfare employers who are likely to have a higher percentage of newly-qualified staff and higher turnover than other sectors. The consequences of high turnover are especially significant in child protection and welfare: high turnover can lead to a loss of organisational memory; a large number of staff on a high learning curve as part of their induction; a complex job like child protection requires experienced staff; low morale can be corrosive for teams; children, young people, families and professionals express their dissatisfaction with repeated changes of allocated social workers, and there are problems with recruiting staff into a sector with high levels of risk, and intense public, political and regulatory scrutiny (Burns, 2012; McFadden *et al.*, 2019). Having a cohort of workers with strong job embeddedness, job satisfaction and longer tenure periods is therefore a significant benefit for employing organisations, children and their families.

The primary aim of the study is to explore what can be learned from the experiences of those staying in child protection and welfare social work for over 10 years. A review of the job retention theory literature led us to examine Job Embeddedness Theory (Mitchell and Lee, 2001) as an organising theory to analyse our data and the next section provides an overview of this theory.

Job embeddedness theory

Job embeddedness theory is a relatively recent theory that fits within the psychological theories of job retention, although to categorise it as such would be misleading as it also employs an ecological framework to explain retention. Job embeddedness is characterised by a range of personal, work, community, financial and environmental factors that influence a worker's retention (Mitchell and Lee, 2001; Zhang *et al.*, 2012). The theory suggests that the greater the number of strands or complexity in an employee's 'web' or network, the more embedded they are in the organisation which lowers the likelihood that they will leave (Holtom *et al.*, 2006). At first glance, this can appear somewhat negative: employees that are most embedded, 'trapped' or 'stuck' due to their life circumstances and length of experience with an employer, are most likely to stay whether they want to stay or not. However, to apply this model to social work, some newly-qualified social workers in their mid-20s without children or other caring responsibilities, who are unmarried, with no mortgage, a web/network that is lower in complexity with fewer strands, are therefore more able to break their connection to their employer in order to, for example, spend a few years working abroad (see Table 2 above).

Job embeddedness theory is organised around three dimensions: 'fit', sacrifice' and 'links':

> "Fit refers to an employee's perceived compatibility with the organization and surrounding community (Lee *et al.*, 2004; Mitchell *et al.*, 2001). Good person–organization fit occurs when an employee's personal values, career aspirations, knowledge, skills, and ability are compatible with the organizational culture, and with the requirements of his or her job" (Zhang *et al.*, 2012, p. 221)

'Fit' also extends to the worker's and their immediate family member's fit with the wider community taking into account factors such as the availability of schools, proximity to and connections with family and friends, weather, the quality and availability of local amenities, the cultural milieu, and quality of services (Mitchell and Lee, 2001; Zhang *et al.*, 2012).

When an employee leaves a post, or when they are considering leaving a post, they have to evaluate the 'sacrifices' that would need to be made to take up a new post. 'Sacrifice is the perceived psychological, social, or material cost of leaving one's organization and one's community' (Zhang *et al.*, 2012, p. 221). Sacrifices can include: losing a peer-social support system, friendships, a longer commute to work, a high learning curve in a new post, establishing oneself and family in a new occupational setting and community, and salary and related benefits. These and other perceived losses can diminish the attractiveness of a new post elsewhere.

The greater the number of links and strands between an individual and their family with the employing organisation and community, the harder it can be to break an attachment to an employer and leave a post. 'Links are defined as formal or informal connections between a person, institutions, or other people' (Zhang *et al.*, 2012, p. 221). As employees become older and more experienced, their links within the employing

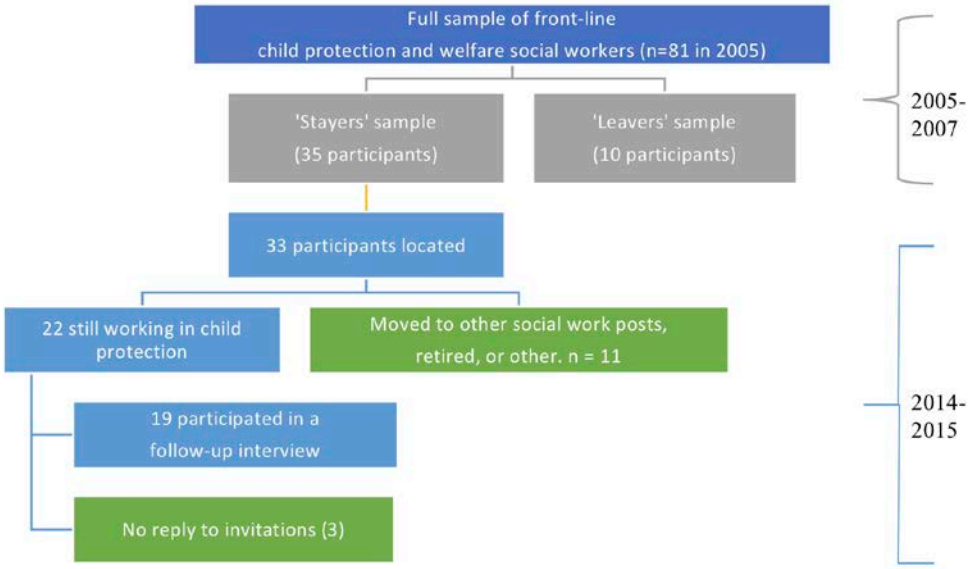
agency and community grow and deepen: connections and friendship are formed and nurtured; they take on roles in community, education and voluntary organisations; employee's *and* family members' friendships grow; and relationships to and participation in sport, hobbies and cultural activities can be difficult to sever. Additionally, there can be pressure from family members not to sever these connections: there are risks associated with moving schools, and fear of the unknown and inertia can increase as links grow and strengthen, thus making it harder to leave a job as both the employee and their family are more embedded in the organisation and community. Leaving what can be intense and close peer support networks, previously identified in our research as being highly significant for social workers in child protection (Burns, 2012), can further complicate a decision to stay or leave.

We now examine how social workers with between 10-30+ years of experience of child protection social work on five team in Ireland describe their decisions to stay in terms of 'fit', 'sacrifice', and 'links'.

Methodology

Data for this study was collected over two time periods, with the same participants, close to 10 years apart. The first data collection period between mid-2005 and early 2007 involved interviews with 35 social workers and senior social workers practising in child protection and welfare social work, and 10 interviews with social workers that had left this area of practice. In 2014/2015, the researchers set out to establish how many of the 'stayers' sample were still working in child protection and welfare social work (e.g., not fostering or adoption). Through snowball sampling and by using email addresses from the first study, 33 of the social workers were located. As illustrated in Figure 1, 22 participants from the original dataset were eligible to contribute to the study as they were still working in front-line child protection; all were invited to participate and 19 (86%) agreed to be re-interviewed.

Figure 1 - Overview of qualitative study samples



The average age at interview for the 35 social workers in the 2005-2007 stayers' sample was 37.6 years (median 32). Of the 19 participants that participated in both data collection periods, their average age at interview in the 2005-2007 sample was 39 years (median 35) and 47 years (median 43) for the 2014-2015 sample. Table 3 outlines the age range for participants at both time periods and Table 4 provides a summary of the length of participants' experience in child protection and welfare:

Table 3: Age range at interviews one and two

Age Range	2005-2007	2014-2015
21-30	12	0
31-40	10	6
41-50	9	7
51-60	2	4
60+	2	2
Total samples	**35**	**19**

Table 4: Length of child protection and welfare experience at interviews one and two

	2005-2007	2014-2015
0-2 years	9	0
3-5 years	15	0
6-10 years	7	3
11-15 years	3	10
16-20 years	1	4
21+ years	0	2
Totals	**35**	**19**

At interview two, the average total time spent in child protection and welfare for the 19 participants was 15 years (median 13 years), with the lowest with 10 years' experience and the highest with 30 years+ experience. At interview period one, all of the social workers were employed at professionally qualified social work or senior social work practitioner grades (team leaders and principal social workers were excluded by the original sampling strategy). At interview period two, 11 were social workers, 5 were senior social work practitioners and 3 were social work team leaders.

Permission to undertake the study was provided by the relevant Area Manager, Principal Social Workers for each team and the Head of Policy and Strategy at the Child and Family Agency. Each participant also voluntarily consented to participate and also consented for the two datasets to be joined and analysed. All of the new interview data was imported into the original qualitative software database and the original master confidential record of participants was used to match interview transcripts. The research team comprised two of the researchers from the first data collection period and they undertook all of the second interviews following a reread of the original transcripts. A new team member assisted with the analysis of the second dataset. Ethical approvals were granted by the Social Research Ethics Committee at the authors' institution. All of the names used in the findings section are pseudonyms.

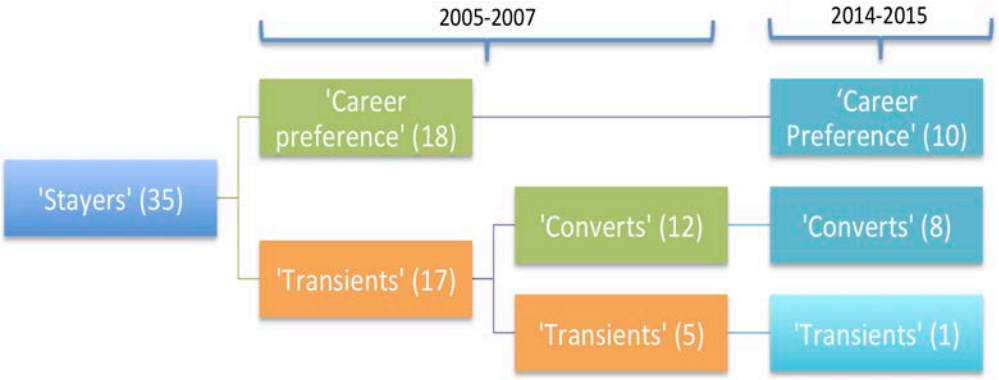
The study employed a thematic analysis to understand how the participants ascribe meaning to their career pathways. The thematic analysis focused on the three dimensions of job embeddedness theory ('fit', sacrifice' and 'links') and established the descriptive patterns and narratives arising across the datasets.

Findings

Career preference typology

A key finding of the original study (Burns, 2011) was that social workers' career preferences, particularly those formed during training and shortly after qualification, are a helpful way to understand the likelihood that they will stay in child protection. As many new graduates begin their professional career with a first post in child protection and welfare, their views on career preferences are significant. Our typology categorised three types of social work career preferences. The 'career preference' social worker described child protection as their first career preference; they wanted to make a contribution to children and families, and expected a long tenure period. The 'transient' social worker entered child protection and welfare as they felt they needed (or were told by someone that they need) to 'prove' themselves in child protection to build their curriculum vitae, before they could access their chosen area of social work. 'Transients' expected a short tenure period in child protection. 'Converts' started as a 'transients', but unexpectedly found that they enjoyed this work and changed their preference to stay in child protection and expected to stay for the medium to long term.

Figure 2 - Analysis of career preference typology using the two datasets



As Figure 2 shows, 10 of the 18 'career preference' social workers were retained, somewhat less than had been expected. It would be interesting to follow up these leavers to see how many were reluctant leavers. As expected, 8 of the 12 'converts' were retained. The small sample size means that these results could be due to chance and a much larger sample is required to assess the typology more robustly.

Job embeddedness: 'fit', 'sacrifice' and 'links'

The growth in professional confidence over time really stood out for this cohort: they are no longer novices, and are experienced/expert professionals who have developed a sense of ease and comfort in their roles. As well as finding the work meaningful, they take pride in their work and feel that they have developed as practitioners over time. In terms of fit, the level of autonomy and flexibility in the role appealed to many of the participants. Furthermore, the stability that occurs once the five-year mark is reached was significant for many of the participants:

> "…it's such a learning curve that it takes some years to even feel confident as a practitioner and then I think like I'm glad I've given myself the opportunity to keep building on that because I think sometimes people leave that bit too soon, that maybe they don't let the skills ... they don't let things settle or don't see how they can manage maybe another 5 years in the job because the first 5 have been so difficult." (Jane)

> "I feel I have something good to contribute. And I remember feeling, as a kid myself, not being happy all the time, and I see the kids I work with and I try to help make their lives better." (Sophia)

For some participants, making a decision to stay or leave involved a mix of fit with sacrifice decisions:

> "I suppose in relation to myself I just found it was a happy fit. There would have been opportunities for me to move on, but any of the opportunities would have meant a huge change in terms of say transport. It would have made a huge

> change in relation to having to say move to a different area or move to a different team and I didn't feel the fit was right." (Ryan)

A key theme for some female social workers in terms of 'fit' during this period was that their partners were made redundant during the economic crisis, particularly those working in the construction sector. Being in a public-sector post with contract stability, benefits and tenure was a significant factor for some families and contributed to their decisions to stay. The 'sacrifices' of leaving a permanent, tenured job in an economic crisis was evaluated as being higher during this period than at a time of economic stability:

> "We're so grateful to have a job as well. I need the job too with the mortgage and the crèche and everything else." (Ciara)

> "Some of it is economic as well, you know wanting to be permanent and pensionable, those sorts of jobs are few and far between now. So that is a big factor as well in terms of not taking a leap of faith into something else, into the unknown." (Abbey)

In terms of 'sacrifices', the sunk costs of becoming expert at child protection work are significant, and when achieved, contribute to greater ease and confidence in performing this role. Participants reflected upon the sacrifice costs of leaving and reverting to being a novice in a new role with a steep learning curve:

> "Now, even though the work is still hard, if I don't know what to do I know where to find the answer and I know fairly easily where it is. So, in actual fact, there's an ease in my job now because I'm experienced. So I'm not going to do it to myself, to go off somewhere else and change things." (Sophia)

The personal and professional links and networks (embeddedness) that experienced practitioners develop over time are important and it is a considerable sacrifice to give up a strong peer support network and friendships, which practitioners attributed significant weight to in making a decision to stay or leave:

> "… I was considering moving to England last year, actually. But there was no point. And then I just thought, I'm actually probably too old now to be moving to another country. And I suppose, yes, because it is a stressful job, so to be without your social network would be … it would have to be a great job, you know". (Kelly)

The significance of peer supports within social work teams was a key finding in the first phase of our study (Burns, 2011). Being a member of a professional social work community/team helped to ameliorate the strains of the job, provided practitioners with practical, professional and emotional resource exchanges with peers, and deep friendships developed, all of which participants identified as aiding their retention in the second phase of our study:

> "Whether you're having personal or professional issues, there's someone that

> you can go and chat to about it, they're on hand … the community was a very comfortable place to be. Especially when things are difficult, that community was a very comfortable place to be because people were very like-minded." (Denise)
>
> "I think, with regards to the job, though, I stayed because of the team. They've always been a good group of people to work with, very supportive." (Jenna)

As practitioners get more experienced and develop their networks and move out of the novice phase, they start to consider how their own and family links deepen as they move through the life course, which are then factored into decisions about staying or leaving:

> "I think probably getting married as well, if I wasn't married I probably would have just handed in the resignation and took off you know travelling or something like that, where now I suppose I'm more confined to [place name]. So you know you've other kind of considerations there, you are not just thinking about yourself." (Abbey)

Despite the stresses of the job and the rapidly changing nature of the organisational context, being challenged by a complex and interesting job, learning all of the time, the excitement of the work and a sense of making a difference, contributed to these social workers decisions to stay:

> "It's still very challenging which is the good and the bad. I think of that in the good context, it's always incredibly challenging which is why it's never boring, which is why doing it for so long, the job itself, you never tire of because you have something different challenging you all the time." (Deborah)
>
> "I kind of enjoy it, you know, I mean like it is interesting work, you know. It's varied … it's privileged work to a lot of us…" (Kelly)
>
> "So it's a little bit of everything and I think I thrive on that, because yes it could be chaos, but you never really know it's a bit kind of excitement as well you know, you never really know what's going to happen from day, from nine to five." (Laura)

Consistency of staying narratives over time

Interviewers reread participants' original transcripts to prepare for the second interview: the final part of the interview guide was based on themes related to their career pathway and retention story expressed in a participant's first interview. These participant-specific questions formed the final part of each interview. An unexpected finding of this study was that there was a strong similarity between social workers' narratives of staying in their first and second interviews, despite there being a decade between interviews. Participants were not provided with a copy of the first interview transcript in advance, but it was *as if* they had just reread the transcript prior to the second interview. Fifteen of the nineteen study participants had a consistent positive

story of staying and retention during their two interviews. Below are representative quotations of three staying narratives used by social workers both in their first and second interviews: the important of being part of a team; working with people and seeing positive change; and strong job variety and autonomy.

Being part of a team and a peer support network/community:

> "I still like coming to work every morning. A big factor I think is the support with the team. We all get along well. We support each other ... We take time to support each other. Even if we are busy" (Jenna - interview one)

> "I think with regards the job, I stay because of the team. There have always been a good group of people to work with, very supportive" (Jenna – interview two)

Working with people and seeing positive change:

> "I like working with people… I see opportunities for change., I mean specially within families, within clients… a lot of positive outcomes in a number of cases I work with" (Denise – interview one)

> "It was a very good choice [to stay working as a social worker] because I really enjoyed working with people, having the insights and helping me improve the situation for people" (Denise - interview two)

Job variety and autonomy:

> "I think child protection is the one area where you get to experience every side of social difficulties and you are free to work with specialisation in one area of not" (Sophie – interview one)

> "I can see clients with mental health problems, addictions … learning difficulties. I see all sorts of clients. I've a variety of work to feed my curiosity" (Sophie – interview two)

While there were aspects of their day-to-day work and the wider practice and policy environment that social workers did not like, these experienced child protection and welfare social workers had constructed staying narratives that helped them explain their long-standing commitment to working in child protection and welfare social work. These narratives did not change much over the decade between interviews. This may suggest that these narratives are actively reproduced as a central part of their professional identities (Riessman, 1993).

Discussion and concluding comments

The findings demonstrate the importance of job embeddedness for these social workers. They feel that their confidence has increased with their years of experience and learning, bringing an improved ability to contribute. The development of their professional and personal links and networks over time is a significant source of support

in a stressful work environment. These factors, combined for some with the importance of job security, mean that the risk of changing jobs would be a high sacrifice.

The fiscal and economic crisis experienced by the Irish State during this period meant that tenured public-sector jobs like child protection social work represented stable employment with strong benefits in a time of high unemployment. Few social workers willingly gave up these posts during this economic crisis. Career opportunities in the community and voluntary sector, and other social work posts in state agencies, were severely constrained due to austerity and a recruitment embargo. While the period of recession and austerity was a research theme, it was not a prominent theme in our data as a contributory reason for high retention, at least for this particular sample. The main limitation of the study is the size of the sample, which raises questions about the strength of the typology analysis and whether the staying narratives examined here also apply to other child protection and welfare social workers in Ireland. However, the focus of this article is to tell the story of a specific group of social workers with a long tenure period in child protection and not to claim that they are representative of the wider population of child protection social workers in Ireland.

The main message of this longitudinal study is that there are social workers who want to stay even after doing child protection for a long tenure: 15 of 19 study participants at interview two wanted to stay working in child protection and welfare. Job embeddedness theory was a good fit in this study to assist with framing, collecting and analysing this data. Using theory and pre-existing literature is critical to the design and implementation of a research study; however, they can also be somewhat limiting if applied too rigidly as the experiences of other countries and disciplines regarding turnover do not adequately explain and map onto the Irish experience. A particular example from this study was a new surprising finding that these workers construct a staying narrative that appears to be stable over time. These narratives were mostly narratives that were counter to the perceived dominant narrative of get your experience and leave as early as you can. While these 'stayer' narratives are little known and provide new insights as outlined in the data analysis above, they should be read as complimentary to the high turnover/low retention narrative, which co-exist in practice.

Mostly, the social workers in this sample enjoy this field of social work practice and find this work meaningful. They find the work hard, but this is part of why they stay: it tests their skills, the variety of tasks are high, the work provides ongoing positive professional challenges, and the work 'fits' with their ongoing professional commitment to children and their families. Child protection is amongst the most demanding jobs in health and social work: these social workers should be provided with a world-class work environment and supports to mitigate the demands and impact of the work. However, the social workers in this sample, again in their second interview, described working conditions and supports that continue to be less than optimal. This is particularly worrying given the findings of recent research which found that,

> "child protection workers suffered from more psychological distress than the general population, and many had distress levels greater than those reported by typical outpatient mental health clients" (McFadden *et al.*, 2015, p. 1556).

There are several implications of this study for the profession and educators to prepare new entrants to work and stay in this challenging work environment. The profession and educators could work with employers to improve the work and support environment, help to address the structural causes that bring families into contact with the child protection system, highlight and publicise the positive contribution of this sector to the public, and resist pressure to produce 'work-ready' graduates. No amount of 'resilience' development and preparation by educators can prepare workers for: work environments where workloads are too high; induction policies for newly-qualified and new workers are non-existent or not adequately implemented; and where employing organisations do not plentifully provide creative and well-resourced practical and emotion-focused supports for its employees. One of the strengths of the creation of one child protection and welfare agency in Ireland has been to bring dedicated management focus to the development of the sector, which was not evident when it was part of a larger health service. However, the rapid pace of organisational and policy changes in Tusla since its establishment has been intense (see Child and Family Agency, 2017a; Smyth, 2019), which is a known cause of occupation stress. Accounts from frontline practitioners provided to the authors over the last two years indicates that while the new Agency is energetically reforming and modernising, frontline social workers and team are struggling to manage the pace and volume of system change. A period of consolidation could contribute to Tusla's retention strategy; however, political imperatives and regulatory scrutiny may mean that a slowdown in the pace of reform may not be possible.

There are a number of significant developments within Tusla to address child protection and welfare social workers' retention and recruitment (Child and Family Agency, 2019), a topic which has been a focus of the Health Information Quality Authority (2018) and the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs (Halton *et al.*, 2019; Smyth, 2019). Firstly, two internal surveys were conducted by Tusla in 2017 and 2018 to seek staff members' views on working conditions and how to address recruitment and retention. Secondly, Tusla are due to publish a comprehensive workforce strategy in the first half of 2019. Thirdly, Tusla have recently expanded the number of senior social work practitioner (non-manager) grades in front-line child protection and welfare teams. Fourthly, Tusla are considering improving the salary scales of child protection and welfare social workers in recognition of the high-skill and high-demand work that is child protection and welfare, and as a strategy to recruit experienced social workers into this field of practice. Fifth, they are working with the education sector to improve the supply of social workers. Sixth, they have committed to addressing long-reported issues with working conditions such as high caseloads. Seventh, Tusla has setup an employee welfare section in their human resources department to provide specific interventions such as critical incident stress management programmes and family-friendly policies. Finally, Tusla contends that the adoption of Signs of Safety as its national practice framework will be part of the solution to retaining staff and improving job satisfaction (Child and Family Agency, 2019; Smyth, 2019). A staff turnover rate of under 8% for 2018 is a positive finding and does not indicate a significant overall turnover issue for the Agency compared to

other countries. However, it is clear that there is an ongoing recruitment issue that could exacerbate staff retention into the future.

A key finding of our study is that if you can retain child protection and welfare social workers beyond the 5-year point, their retention narratives often remain constant and appear to become a more central focus of their professional identities. In addition, their embeddedness in the organisation and community intensifies and they have a stronger sense of professional confidence as they move from the novice professional to the experienced professional and expert practitioner stages.

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